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Montana Fish & Wildlife Commission

MINUTES

Montana Fish and Wildlife Video-Conference Commission Meeting

FWP Headquarters – Helena, MT

March 10, 2016

Commission Members Present via video: Richard Stuker Vice-Chairman, Gary Wolfe
Richard Kerstein via telephone
Matt Tourtlotte Helena Headquarters

Fish, Wildlife & Parks Staff Present: Jeff Hagener, Director and FWP Staff.

Guests: March 10, 2016 - See Commission file folder for sign-in sheet.

Topics of Discussion:

1. Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Minutes of the March 10, 2016 Commission Meeting
3. Approval of Commission Expenses
4. Commission Reports
5. Director's Report
6. Montana Radio Company LLC Request to Place and Operate Radio Tower on FWP Land-Final
7. Future Fisheries Project Approvals – Final
8. Browns Lake Fishing Access Site Lease Renewal – Final
9. Ruby River Fishing Access Site Lease Renewals – Final
10. Cabinet Gorge Reservoir Bridge Construction Closure – Final
11. Trout Creek Fishing Season Exception – Final
12. Establish HD 217 Elk B License (Inadvertently Omitted from Original Regulation Proposal)-Final
13. Peregrine Falcon Falconry Take – Final
14. Keep Cool Hills Management Biennial Agreement – Final
15. Canyon Creek Wildlife Management Area Addition Specimen Creek Donation (R3)-Endorsement
16. Machler Conservation Easement (R4) – Endorsement
17. Rumney Foothills Conservation Easement (R4) – Endorsement
18. Raths Conservation Easement (R5) – Endorsement
19. Tiger Ridge Conservation Easement (R6) – Endorsement
20. Public Comment – For Issues Not On This Agenda

1. Call to Order - Pledge of Allegiance
Vice-Chairman Stuker called the meeting to order at 8:31 a.m. and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

2. Approval of Minutes of the February 11, 2016 Commission Meeting
Action: Commissioner Tourtlotte moved and Commissioner Wolfe seconded the motion to approve the minutes of the February 11, 2016, as amended. Motion passed.

3. Approval of Commission Expenses
Action: Commissioner Tourtlotte moved and Commissioner Wolfe seconded the motion to approve the February 2016 Commission expenses. Motion passed.

4. Commission Reports
Vice-Chairman Stuker reported he attended the final Finding Common Ground meeting; committee sent recommendations to the Department; participants seemed to have a better understanding of each other's concerns. Attended a Block Management appreciation dinner in Havre; well attended; a number of Block Management participants received 20-year awards. Attended the first Private Land Public Wildlife (PLPW) meeting. Received several calls regarding shoulder seasons.

Commissioner Wolfe – inaudible

Commissioner Kerstein – inaudible

Commissioner Tourtlotte received a thank you note from the Navratil family, and other correspondence from constituents thanking the Commission for keeping the easement moving forward.

5. Director's Report

Director Hagener updated the Commission on the Grizzly Bear delisting; will have work session in May to discuss a proposal, Memorandum of Agreement and regulatory mechanisms. The PLPW held its first meeting; 11 new and 6 returning members; in the process of looking at possible proposed legislation; good meeting. Working on legislative prep work. Problems with the Bighole-Beaverhead Rules. Precipitation forecast looks more positive; still questionable. Issues with Tribes and Tribal Treaty Hunts; annual Tribal meeting will be held in May. Elk permit deadline is March 15; encourages everyone to apply early.

6. Montana Radio Company LLC Request to Place and Operate Radio Tower on FWP Land – Final

Gary Bertellotti, Region 4 Supervisor, explained in 2014 Montana Radio Company (MRC) approached FWP with a request for consideration to place a 499 foot radio tower on the butte above the Great Falls Sport Shooting Complex (GFSSC) which is owned by FWP. MRC has obtained all pertinent permits and approvals including those from FAA, Cascade County, and Malmstrom AFB. An Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed and released for public review and comment; three comments were received, one opposed, one favored, and one was neutral and more informational; there were no public comments received after Commission endorsement at their December Meeting. FWP and MRC met with the GFSSC members and the options and alternatives were assessed, and concluded the Tower would not be problematic to the Complex purpose or users. If approved by the Commission, all revenue generated from a contractual agreement would be placed in the FWP Real Property Trust account. FWP has done due diligence to assure all details are assessed, and has developed a contractual agreement for use of FWP property by MRC; the use will consist of construction, operation and maintenance of a communication tower; the proposed location has two existing communication towers and a small building present; placing another tower in this location will provide Fort Benton and surrounding communities with radio service and station reception from MRC.

Action: Commissioner Kerstein moved and Commissioner Tourtlotte seconded the motion that the Commission approve the use of FWP lands for the construction and operation of an am/fm radio tower on Fish, Wildlife & Parks property adjacent to the Great Falls Sports Shooting Complex, and negotiate a contract between Fish, Wildlife & Parks and Montana Radio Company.

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Action on Motion: Motion passed.

7. Future Fisheries Project Approvals – Final

Bruce Rich, Fisheries Administrator, explained the Future Fisheries Improvement Program continues to provide funds for projects that restore fishery habitats in streams, rivers and lakes for the benefit of wild fisheries. Applications are reviewed twice each year by the 14-member Citizen Review Panel (CRP) appointed by the Governor. Recommendations are forwarded to the Commission every six months for consideration and approval. For the Winter 2016 funding cycle, the CRP recommended funding 14 of 17 submitted proposals at a program cost of \$458,508.20. Matching funds or in-kind contributions from outside sources total more than \$3.81 million, for a nearly 9-to-1 match. Rankings are based on: benefits to native fish; public benefits; importance of the water body; long-term effectiveness; benefits relative to cost; and cost share. Public comment was solicited for program funding opportunities via news releases, a public meeting, and information posted on FWP's website; no comments were received. EAs were prepared for 2 of the 14 projects recommended for funding; of the remaining 12, 1 project fell under a categorical exclusion, 6 have been or will be assessed under the federal National Environmental Policy Act, and 5 have been or will be completed via other processes. The comment period for drafted EAs ended February 7; 2 comments were received, both supported the projects. FWP recommends the Commission approve the funding recommendations as submitted by the CRP. Completion of these projects would benefit wild fish populations. The Committee's ranking of the Future Fisheries Projects approved for funding by the CRP during the Winter 2016 funding cycle are as follows: (Bolded projects fall under the Native Species Enhancement Program (RIT dollars); non-bolded projects fall under the Future Fisheries Improvement Program (License dollars)):

FINAL SCORES				
Project #	Project Name	Program cost (\$)	Review Score (of 100)	Review Rank
005-2016	French Creek riparian fencing	\$10,000.00	86	1
015-2016	Warm Springs Creek fish passage	\$43,703.00	86	1
006-2016	French Gulch channel restoration	\$70,000.00	85	3
009-2016	Little Blackfoot and Ontario Creek road relocation / floodplain restoration	\$30,000.00	84	4
014-2016	Vermillion River Miners Gulch restoration	\$50,000.00	83	5
010-2016	Long Creek channel restoration	\$15,000.00	82	6
003-2016	Carpenter Creek fish barrier	\$75,000.00	79	7
012-2016	Sucker Creek fish passage	\$16,500.00	79	7
013-2016	Telegraph Creek Lilly Orphan Boy mine reclamation	\$29,600.00	78	9
002-2016	Bostwick Creek fish barrier	\$5,000.00	72	10
011-2016	North Fork Dry Cottonwood Creek culvert replacement	\$26,310.00	71	11
008-2016	Hells Canyon Creek instream flow	\$7,395.20	66	12
001-2016	Big Spring Creek Machler restoration	\$50,000.00	65	13
016-2016	West Fork Gallatin River stream and pond improvement	\$30,000.00	60	14

Action: *Commissioner Wolfe moved and Commissioner Tourtlotte seconded the motion that the Commission approve the Citizen Review Panel funding recommendations for the Winter 2016 funding cycle of the Future Fisheries Improvement Program.*

Commissioner Wolfe and Rich, discussed the three projects not recommended for funding; English George Creek Fish Barrier, Gallatin River Habitat Improvement, Willow Creek Riparian Fencing.

Commissioner Tourtlotte and Michelle McGree, FWP Habitat Restoration Program Officer, discussed the attributes for the success of matching dollars for this cycle.

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

8. Browns Lake Fishing Access Site Lease Renewal – Final

Bruce Rich, Fisheries Administrator, explained FWP has leased the Browns Lake property in Region 2 from the current landowner since 1992, and would like to continue leasing this site for a fee of \$15,000 annually for a 10-year term. For many years, FWP had a gentleman's agreement with the landowner. Since 1992, several lease renewals have occurred in cooperation and negotiations with the landowner. FWP owns property on Browns Lake, it is not developed and the boat access is not as good. Most of the lake shoreline is shallow with a soft lake bed, making it difficult to launch larger water craft. The leased property provides the best boat ramp location on the lake and trees for shade and camping. Improvements include two vault latrines, camp sites and a boat ramp. The latest Angler Pressure Report indicates the lake receives over 13,000 angler days per year. The fishery is for Rainbow Trout that are stocked by FWP; growth and size of the trout is excellent. The lease is important to maintaining the current level of boating and angling access to the lake. The current agreement underwent an EA without seeking public comment; unsolicited comment strongly favors renewing the lease.

Action: *Commissioner Wolfe moved and Commissioner Kerstein seconded the motion that the Commission approve the proposed Browns Lake FAS lease fee of \$15,000 annually for a ten-year term.*

Commissioner Wolfe and Rich discussed property FWP owns on Browns Lake.

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

9. Ruby River Fishing Access Site Lease Renewals – Final

Bruce Rich, Fisheries Administrator, explained since 1997 FWP has leased three properties on the Ruby River from three separate landowners; public notice was provided and public comment was solicited at that time. During this period, several lease renewals have occurred in cooperation and negotiations with the various landowners, but the leases have been continuous without a lapse in public access. In the most recent negotiations Trout Unlimited has offered to partner with the landowners to temporarily increase the lease payment to each of the landowners over the next three to five years. Without these three leases, public access would be restricted on the Ruby River. The only other public access sites on the river are on DNRC sites at the base of the Ruby Dam and the Vigilante Fishing Access Site (FAS) located between the Dam and the community of Alder. Another benefit to anglers is all three landowners offer a corridor of public access along their respective river reaches within their property that ranges from 50 ft. wide to 100 ft. wide, providing easier access for negotiating the brushy river bottom. The Department's recommendation is to renew the Ruby River FAS leases at the negotiated amount of \$7,000 annually per FAS, for a five-year term.

Action: *Commissioner Wolfe moved and Commissioner Kerstein seconded the motion that the Commission approve the proposed Ruby River FAS lease fees of \$7,000 annually per landowner for a five-year term.*

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

10. Cabinet Gorge Reservoir Bridge Construction Closure – Final

Bruce Rich, Fisheries Administrator, explained The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) along with their contractor, Dick Anderson Construction, is replacing the existing Heron Road bridge across Cabinet Gorge Reservoir on the Clark Fork River. Due to required construction means and methods, along with safety concerns, the Department is requesting a 72 hour closure of the waters approximately 1,500' upstream and downstream from the work site. During this 72 hour closure period, an approximately 320' long barge will be blocking the majority of the navigable waterway. The work taking place during this time period will create substantial hazards for waterway users, and any wakes or water disturbances will increase potential hazards; it is safest for the MDT personnel, construction employees, and the public for these waters to be closed during this operation. The Contractor will be responsible for posting closure notifications at the Sanders County Heron boat ramp, Big Eddy boat ramp and the Bull River boat ramp and on both banks approximately 1,500' upstream and downstream of the structure work; two steady burn lights will be attached to each sign; notification will also be posted with the local newspaper and the local radio station, and be issued approximately two to four weeks prior to the

closure. Environmental documentation has been prepared and the project qualifies as a Categorical Exclusion in compliance with the Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) and Federal Highway Administration (FHA) requirements.

Action: *Commissioner Wolfe moved and Commissioner Tourtlotte seconded the motion that the Commission propose a one-instance rule authorizing FWP, in consultation with the local Fish and Wildlife Commissioner, to temporarily close a portion of the Cabinet Gorge Reservoir to address public safety concerns related to the repair of the Heron Road Bridge across the Cabinet Gorge Reservoir during the construction season in 2016.*

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

11. Trout Creek Fishing Season Exception – Final

Bruce Rich, Fisheries Administrator, explained in 2015 the Department reviewed and recommended changes to the Montana State Fishing regulations, which were approved by the Commission in December 2015. During this process, the default Central District Standard fishing season to leave rivers and streams open to angling all year was reworded. This change eliminated the need to list over 40 different exceptions for various streams, but knew some water bodies would need to be listed as new exceptions to preserve the protections already in place. The 2016 regulations are set to go into effect on March 1, 2016, but it has been found that regulations didn't include a seasonal closure exception for Trout Creek in the 2015 process, opening this important trout spawning tributary that joins Hauser Reservoir near Helena to angling earlier than was intended. Spawning fish in this stream are particularly vulnerable to angling because the stream is relatively small, is located near a larger urban center, and is readily accessible from a public roadway. Rainbow Trout are already staging downstream and will soon enter the stream to spawn. To avoid unintended harm to these fish, the Department is asking to enact a seasonal stream closure that would allow angling from the third Saturday in May through November 30 each year. For 2016, the stream would be signed, public notice provided on the FWP website, and all appropriate media outlets. The regulation exception will be incorporated in the 2017 Montana State Fishing Regulations. Public comment was solicited; no comments were received.

Action: *Commissioner Wolfe moved and Commissioner Tourtlotte seconded the motion that the Commission approve the recommended fishing season exception for Trout Creek to allow angling from the third Saturday in May through November 30 each year.*

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

12. Establish HD 217 Elk B License (Inadvertently Omitted from Original Regulation Proposal) – Final

John Vore, Game Management Bureau Chief, explained an important proposal to establish a 217-01 elk B License (quota 200, range 50 - 500), for the new hunting district (HD) 217 to be valid for archery during the archery-only season, the general and a late shoulder season, and to run until February 15 was inadvertently left out of the elk master list which the Commission considered in February. The proposed B licenses are an important part of the management scenario for the new HD that has been agreed to with area landowners and has been vetted with FWP Region 2 staff, area sporting groups and area landowners.

Action: *Commissioner Wolfe moved and Commissioner Tourtlotte seconded the motion that the Commission establish the 217-01 B License with a quota of 200 and a quota range of 50 to 500 for 2016 and 2017 elk hunting seasons as presented by FWP.*

Commissioner Wolfe stated this item was part of the strategy prior to the February Commission meeting and is an important component in addressing the elk issue in HD 217.

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

13. Peregrine Falcon Falconry Take – Final

Ken McDonald, Wildlife Administrator, explained the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) delisted peregrine falcons in 1999 when there were less than 30 known occupied territories in Montana. Monitoring since this time has shown steady increases in the number of nesting pairs and production of young, primarily in western Montana. In 2015, the Montana Peregrine Institute reported 129 active territories, the highest number reported since surveys began in 1994 and the highest reproductive rate recorded since 1994 of 2.4 young/active territories. The take proposed here is based on the 2012 productivity estimate of 203 young fledged and the agreed to take of no more than 5 percent of annual productivity described in FWP's 2007 Final EA. From 2008 through 2011 a total of 42 falcons applied for 18 permits and 5 birds were taken. In the 2012-13 and 2014-15 biennium, take operated under a 10-bird quota for resident falcons, with 1 permit for nonresident falcons; 7 birds were taken including the allowed nonresident take in the 2012-13 biennium and 3 residents took birds during the 2014-15 biennium. FWP received 64 comments; 33 from Montana residents and 31 from non-residents; 60 comments were generally in favor, many suggested FWP increase allowable take and/or lengthen the season of take; 2 comments were opposed. Based on findings in FWP's 2007 Final EA and the history of peregrine take, FWP proposes the Commission:

authorize resident take of 10 nestling or fledged peregrines through a quota system during the 2016-17 biennium; authorize non-resident take of 1 nestling or fledged peregrine through a 2016-17 permit; restrict take to June 1 - August 31; limit take to one peregrine per year per falconer; impose a 2-year waiting period for any falconer successful in taking a peregrine; allow only general or master falconers to take peregrines; prohibit take from eastern Montana to encourage expansion of the breeding population; prohibit take from certain nests of high value wildlife viewing opportunity and/or part of on-going agency approved research efforts (current list of closed-to-take nests = 8); prohibit the sale, barter or exchange of birds from the wild.

Action: *Commissioner Tourtlotte moved and Commissioner Kerstein seconded the motion that the Commission approve FWP's recommendation to authorize the take of up to 10 peregrine falcons for falconry purposes by residents and one peregrine falcon for falconry purposes by nonresidents during the 2016 - 2017 take period.*

Commissioner Kerstein and McDonald discussed non-resident/resident status and issues.

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

14. Keep Cool Hills Management Biennial Agreement – Final

Ken McDonald, Wildlife Administrator, stated there are issues that need to be resolved between the landowner and the Department and as such request the Keep Cool Hills Management Biennial Agreement be tabled and revisited at a later date.

Vice-Chairman Stuker stated no objections were made by the Commission; agenda item is tabled.

15. Canyon Creek Wildlife Management Area Addition Specimen Creek Donation (R3) – Endorsement

Ken McDonald, Wildlife Administrator, explained the Specimen Creek Property donation would add approximately 700 acres of important wildlife habitat to the northern border of the Canyon Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA); the property would increase the size of the WMA roughly 30 percent. The land has high conservation values and is adjacent to FWP and U.S. Forest Service (FS) lands. Accepting donation of the property will require additional weed control and perimeter fencing to bring the property up to WMA standards. The primary goal is to expand wildlife habitat and further protect a stream corridor containing native westslope cutthroat trout, while maintaining public access to public lands in a strategic location. The parcel, like the existing Canyon Creek WMA, provides hunting opportunity for mule deer and elk, winter range for mule deer and moose, and spring, summer and fall range for all three of these big game species. Grizzly and black bear, wolves, Canada lynx, wolverine, bobcat, etc., utilize the area, and this parcel falls within the Continental Divide wildlife movement corridor between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) and areas further south. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) approached FWP asking if the Department would be willing to manage the property; RMEF is working on a variety of funding requests in order secure the land; no Habitat Montana dollars are involved; restrictions do not apply. Upon Commission endorsement, FWP will solicit public review, comments and analysis.

Action: *Commissioner Wolfe moved and Commissioner Kerstein seconded the motion that the Commission endorse this addition to Canyon Creek Wildlife Management Area, allowing the Department to proceed with further work on this project.*

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Mike Mueller, RMEF, encouraged by sportsmen to look at this property; location is strategic; would improve and enhance access to over 5,000 acres of public land.

Nick Gevok, Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF), commends RMEF for taking the lead; good for all kinds of wildlife; great project; supports endorsement.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

16. Machler Conservation Easement (R4) – Endorsement

Ken McDonald, Wildlife Administrator, explained FWP seeks Commission endorsement to purchase a Conservation Easement (CE) to protect wildlife habitat, ensure agricultural production, and provide public access to the Machler Property. The CE would encompass approximately 2,700 acres of unbroken sagebrush-grassland habitat in HD 417. The area is within sage-grouse core area, and has nine active sage-grouse leks within four miles. The Machler property is part of a larger landscape key to maintaining viable populations of sage grouse, and providing important sharp-tailed grouse, mule deer, pronghorn, and native non-game species habitat. The property adjoins 1,920 acres of DNRC lands currently inaccessible to the public. Mark Machler seeks to sell his property but wants to insure it is conserved in perpetuity; Machler approached FWP about placing a CE on the ranch prior to selling to an interested neighbor. Both Machler and the interested buyer have been explained the terms and processes of CEs and are willing to work with the Department on developing. Mr. Machler has demonstrated a favorable history in working with the Department, and owns other lands with a CE. The CE would conserve agriculture and wildlife habitat, and provide public access to the property's lands and adjacent public lands. Endorsement by the Commission would allow FWP to proceed further with landowner negotiations and to conduct necessary analyses and public review processes. Habitat Montana funds would be the primary funding source for the project.

Action: *Commissioner Tourtlotte moved and Commissioner Wolfe seconded the motion that the Commission endorse the Machler Property Conservation Easement, allowing FWP to proceed with further work on this project.*

Vice-Chairman Stuker stated he fully supports these types of projects.

Commissioner Tourtlotte stated this is a good project with valuable sage-grouse habitat and the high concentration of leks.

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Nick Gevok, MWF, strongly supports endorsement; great for sage-grouse habitat.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

17. Rumney Foothills Conservation Easement (R4) – Endorsement

Ken McDonald, Wildlife Administrator, explained the Department is seeking endorsement to pursue CEs on 7,512 acres of intermountain foothill grassland habitat on two parcels (3,423 and 4,089 acres) within the Rumney Ranch near Cascade. The Rumney family is interested in selling a CE to FWP to streamline and potentially expand their livestock operation, and to conserve and possibly enhance wildlife habitat while maintaining public access. The foothill grasslands, which are intermixed with riparian and shrub habitats, are priority habitats for maintaining stable populations of elk, mule and white-tailed deer, antelope, sharp-tailed and forest grouse, furbearers and other native species, including several species of concern. The mountain foothill native rangeland is some of the best big game winter range, year round habitat, and sharp-tailed grouse habitat in the area. The two parcels cumulatively consist of 11.75 miles of native riparian creek habitats and are tributaries of the Missouri River. Upon endorsement, appropriate analysis, public review processes, and negotiations will be conducted. Habitat Montana funds would be the primary funding source for the project.

Action: *Commissioner Kerstein moved and Vice-Chairman Stuker seconded the motion that the Commission endorse the Rumney Ranch Foothills Conservation Easement project, allowing FWP to proceed with further work on this project.*

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Nick Gevok, MWF, this CE could leave a working ranch on the landscape; supports endorsement.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

18. Rath's Conservation Easement (R5) – Endorsement

Ken McDonald, Wildlife Administrator, explained the Rath's property comprises approximately 11,500 acres of private land in HD 530. The property consists of approximately 9,800 acres of native sagebrush grassland, 300 acres of ponderosa pine ridges, and 600 acres herbaceous marsh along Currant and Merrills Spring Creeks; and adjoins 1,920 acres of DNRC land of which 640 acres are not publicly accessible. Native habitats on the ranch are key to maintaining sage-grouse, mule deer, white-tailed deer, antelope, Merriam's turkey, sharp-tailed grouse, pheasants, furbearer and native species populations. The property includes high quality big game winter range and core sage-grouse habitat, including a lek with the highest male attendance; an FWP research project in the vicinity has confirmed extensive sage-grouse use of this property. The property is managed as a working cattle ranch, and the landowner and his family want to provide quality wildlife habitat, while maintaining their livelihood under the terms of a CE. A CE on this property would conserve a variety of valuable wildlife habitat types, prevent fragmentation from conversion or other land use changes, and provide public recreational access, all in perpetuity. Upon endorsement, FWP would conduct appropriate analyses, public review processes and negotiations. Habitat Montana funds would be the primary funding source for the project.

Action: *Commissioner Tourtlotte moved and Commissioner Wolfe seconded the motion that the Commission endorse the Rath's conservation easement project, allowing Fish, Wildlife and Parks to proceed with further work on this project.*

Commissioner Kerstein and McDonald discussed landowner tax credit eligibility.

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

19. Tiger Ridge Conservation Easement (R6) – Endorsement

Ken McDonald, Wildlife Administrator, explained FWP proposes to pursue the purchase of a perpetual CE on approximately 12,300 acres of deeded land in Choteau and Blaine counties. The property is located in the southern foothills of the Bears Paw Mountains along Little Birch Creek and consists of two separate parcels eight miles apart. The larger parcel is approximately 10,500 acres and the smaller parcel is approximately 1,800 acres. The ranch leases 1,120 acres of DNRC and BLM land, and is adjacent to several thousand more acres of public land. The ranch provides winter range for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn antelope and consists of native prairie grassland, sagebrush steppe, and prairie forest habitats. The entire property is located within general sage-grouse habitat and there are several active sage-grouse leks within four miles of the property. A CE on the property would protect and expand recreational opportunities in this region, and enhance and conserve a large tract of native habitat for the benefit of wildlife, while maintaining the traditional ranching and



agricultural values of this property. Upon endorsement, FWP would conduct appropriate analysis, public review processes, and negotiations. Habitat Montana funds would be the primary funding source for the project, with direction for the Region to look for other funding sources.

Action: *Commissioner Kerstein moved and Vice-Chairman Stuker seconded the motion that the Commission endorse the Tiger Ridge Conservation Easement project, allowing the Department to proceed with further work on the project.*

Vice-Chairman Stuker asked for public comment.

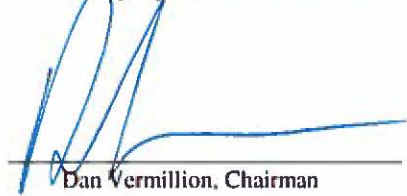
Action on Motion: *Motion passed.*

17. Public Comment – For Issues Not On This Agenda

Commissioner Wolfe and Director Hagener discussed the logistics for the April Commission meeting and tour being held in Dillon.

Action: *Commissioner Tourtlotte moved and Commissioner Kerstein seconded the motion to adjourn the meeting. Motion Passed.*

The meeting adjourned at 10:18 a.m.



Dan Vermillion, Chairman

M. Jeff Hagener, Director